‘Getting Hands On with Other Creative Minds’: Establishing a Community of Practice around Primary Art and Design at the Art Museum

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At a time of widespread concern over the decline of art teaching in schools, this article considers the findings of a practitioner led action research project exploring the potential of art museum and artist-led CPD (Continued Professional Development) programmes to develop primary teacher knowledge, skills and confidence teaching in art and design. The project involved 68 teachers from over 40 primary schools who were introduced to a Renaissance painting of Cupid and Psyche in a series of training sessions at the museum in early 2019. Schools were then invited to submit art work to an end-of-project exhibition which opened in December. Over the course of the year, more than 500 children aged between 4 and 11 visited the museum to look at the painting and more than 3,800 studied it at school using specially created digital learning resources. We draw on survey and email feedback, interviews, blog posts, photographs and artwork collected during the project to discuss how the project provided expert training about art objects, materials and processes and brought teachers together to transform practice and extend pupil outcomes. We also consider how a constructivist pedagogy might encourage more participatory, open ended and playful approaches to teaching art and design to stimulate careful looking, deep thinking, and experimentation with materials and techniques. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential of communities of practice to bring together artists, teachers and art museum professionals to support the development of visual literacy and creativity in children and young people.

Keywords

teacher training, visual literacy, making, museum education, primary art and design, creativity, practitioner research

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Introduction

The Inspire project was created in response to the decline in art specialist teacher training in UK primary schools. This was identified in the 2016 NSEAD (National Society for Education in Art and Design) survey which found 55 per cent of subject coordinators rarely or never attended subject-specific training. Although 67 per cent of art teachers surveyed stated that they would like to attend museum training, only 25 per cent were able to do so. There has also been a reduction in the time spent training pre-service teachers to teach art and it is increasingly rare to find specialist art training pathways for primary pre-service teachers (Gregory 2019). Although there has been a growth in school-based teacher training programmes, the effect of these on teacher knowledge, skills and experience is not yet known. Green & Mitchell's (1998) study of initial teacher trainee partnership effectiveness in preparing students to teach art in primary school found that although teachers were able to support trainees in matter of classroom management and resources, they were mostly unable to help them to develop subject knowledge and an understanding of art teaching and learning. They found that teachers often lacked vital subject knowledge, particularly in relation to National Curriculum requirements around understanding and awareness of the work of artists, craft workers and designers in relation to pupils' own creative work. They argue that 'unless teachers become both more knowledgeable in art and reflective about their teaching of the subject, it will not be possible for them to develop such skills in students' (Green & Mitchell 1998, 253). If teachers are not being taught to teach art while they are training, are not observing confident and knowledgeable art teaching in their placement schools and are not being offered training to develop their subject specialist knowledge, then it is very unlikely that they will develop their own knowledge, confidence and skills teaching the subject.

The project is also underpinned by the team's experience as artists and gallery educators. The artist's practice spans almost three decades of in-person workshops and blog posts which aimed 'to create a community which nurtures teachers, educators and artists together in a safe space where ideas can be shared' (email correspondence between artist and author). My own practice as museum educator has been developed through more than twenty years of working with local schools and teachers as part of the museum's long-established schools programme. We had been collaborating to run art and design focused training sessions for primary school teachers for several years prior to the project. Although we had a handful of regular attendees who were well supported and confident about the role and importance of art within their setting, the majority of teachers we worked with reported how difficult it was both to find the time to develop their art teaching, and to get support from senior managers within schools to do so. Many teachers were not allowed to be released from school to take part in art and design focused training and so we realised the need to run some of our CPDL sessions at weekends or after school. For the same reason, we also offered these sessions at a reduced rate as many teachers were paying for art and design training out of their own pockets. It was through these initial sessions that we began to develop our community of practice.

The Inspire project was born out of these experiences and aimed to raise the status of children's interpretations, art and making through a high-profile public exhibition at the museum. Inspired by the National Gallery's long-running Take One Project, students and teachers were encouraged to look deeply and

thoughtfully at the focus painting of Cupid and Psyche by Jacopo del Sellaioand to respond imaginatively through thinking, talking and making together. The project was launched with a day of training at the museum at the start of 2019. The teachers were given access to high- quality reproductions of the focus painting, copies of the PowerPoints used in the training session and information about the painting. The artists documented the sessions in detail and published photographs and commentaries from the day on their website (AccessArt 2020).

Methodology

Our project aimed to explore how art museum collections and programmes might act as a hub for the development of a community of practice around art and design teaching in local primary schools. Effective communities of practice take the starting point that 'learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not an individual mind' (Lave & Wenger 1991, 15). Knowledge is understood to be constructed collaboratively through practice and the process of doing, making and being within the social world. This is a particularly powerful model for art and design teaching as it allows for the development of embodied ways of knowing through objects, artefacts and materials in the physical world alongside theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. We also drew on Prentice's research on effective art training for pre-service teachers which found benefits in creating a participatory community of practice around art teaching. He concluded that the action research project was in itself was a 'powerfully motivating experience' for those involved (Prentice 2002, 80). Our community of practice was supported through the training sessions and events, digital resources and an end of project exhibition. We also kept in contact with the participating schools offering support and advice.

This article documents the project team's observations, discussions and decisions over the course of the project as we developed this community. We followed an action research methodology to explore how we might improve our practice and the contexts within which we are working (McNiff 2017, 18). At every stage of the project, we were guided by the belief that the process of research through practice has the potential to transform ways of thinking and doing: 'research, knowledge development and knowledge dissemination are done by practitioners who consider themselves agents of change' (Ampartzaki *et al*. 2013, 6). By focusing on action through practice and assign meaning to those actions we also acknowledge our positionality as practitioner researchers (Cohen *et al*. 2000, 35). In line with the constructivist approach, our understanding of how knowledge is constructed is both inclusive and dynamic and acknowledges the role of both the practitioner and of participant voices and to enact change (Freire 1970). Drawing on Pringle's work, we were also interested in how the art museum might become a context for creative experimentation, and curiosity, 'where ideas and knowledge are explored and shared by practitioner researchers working alongside academic and non-academic researchers' (Pringle 2020, 153).

The project was designed and delivered following the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and was subject to the museum's internal ethics review panel. We were committed to ensuring the project was inclusive and designed to ensure maximum benefit for the participant and the project team wrote to the head teacher of every school in the county to invite them to participate. We collected feedback from museum staff, teachers, visitors and children

over the course of the project and gained consent from teachers and parents to share their artwork and other responses in the exhibition and related publications. Survey, visitor and participant data has been anonymised.

The exhibition (shown in Figure 1) was a key output of the project and a team of museum educators and artists spent several days reviewing and discussing the submissions. This process was supported by input from a network of critical friends which included the museum director, exhibition manager, a research scientist and one of our local teacher partners (McNiff 2017, 210). We also drew on guidance from the National Gallery's Take One project. Submissions consisted of a slideshow from each school containing images and descriptions of the evolution of their project, photographs of final artworks and reflections from the adults and children involved in the project. We looked for evidence of children being given opportunities to collaborate and to direct their own learning in line with constructivist approach modelled within the training sessions. We were also interested in how teachers supported children's visual literacy by encouraging close looking and careful study of the focus painting, and through making and the use of a range of different materials and art techniques. The following discussion is based on the content analysis of the data collected over the course of the project. The success of any CPD programme must ultimately focus on pupil outcomes and impact on student achievement (Cordingley *et al.* 2015, 4), so we looked for evidence of change in practice both within the teacher reports and the children's responses and artwork. The long-term and sustained nature of the project over the course of a year allowed valuable time for change and reflection to take place.

Establishing a community of practice of art and design education

'So good to get hands on with other creative minds. I watched in awe of other artists. The buzz of creativity was inspiring. Lovely to have the experts on hand.'

As demonstrated in the quote above, feedback from the teachers involved revealed that they valued the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills working alongside artists, museum educators, curators and research scientists. This was evidenced in both the survey data collected after the initial training sessions and in the post-project surveys, as the comment above in response to the question

Figure 1
The Inspire exhibition

'What did you gain from the session?' reveals. Artists and museum experts shared their knowledge and skills with the participating teachers through training sessions, digital resources and exhibition by providing information about the painting, artistic techniques and materials and modelling good practice as shown in Figures 2 and 3. This finding is supported by the Developing Great Teaching Review which reported how the involvement of external expertise in teacher CPD was crucial in 'bringing about substantial improvements to pupil outcomes' (Cordingley *et al.* 2015, 6). This expertise might lie in a number of different areas but includes access to in-depth, specialist content knowledge. Prentice (2002, 79) also recommends looking outside of the classroom to make contact with a range of artists, craftspeople and designers, museum and gallery educators and representatives of local and national arts organisations as part of a training offer for teachers. He emphasises the importance of being able to receive strong messages about the value of art, through art educators, policy maker, schools' leaders and their peers.

These findings indicate that teachers both need and value expert knowledge as part of their preparation to teach. The Cupid and Psyche painting cannot be understood without first identifying the main protagonists within the narrative from Greek and Roman mythology. Once you are given access to these codes within the painting it can be interpreted through the composition and design to allow the viewer to unlock the meaning. This is similar to the process of learning to read and this links back to how panels of this kind would have been the equivalent of first picturebooks for the young children growing up in the Renaissance palaces (Campbell 2009). The involvement of specialist researchers from the museum's conservation department acted as a catalyst for teachers to develop their own knowledge and expertise by carrying out further research with their classes. One school studied the writings of Renaissance artist Cennino Cennini to find out about how egg tempera paint was made (Figure 4), another invited a local

Figure 2
Teachers working in the museum during one of the training sessions

Figure 3
Teachers working in the art studio during one of the training sessions

scientist to help them to carry out some experiments on the effects of colour and light on plants. This increased teacher knowledge led directly to an increase in pupil knowledge. Some schools spent weeks looking at and talking about the painting as this teacher reported in the post-project survey: 'The Cupid and Pysche painting was something most of our children would have never seen or heard of but now, if you ask any of the children in Year 1 and Year 2 at my school, they can tell you the entire story from start to finish!' Another school noticed how children were 'nattering' about the painting in the playground, thinking about what happened next (transcript from public talk). These comments further reveal the power of the community of practice these sessions created – extending beyond the museum to the school, classroom and playground.

New directions for art museum research

One unintended consequence of the project was that the children and teachers' interests in the painting stimulated the commissioning of new academic research into the painting which then formed part of the end of project exhibition. Conservators and heritage scientists undertook cutting-edge technical investigations on the painting using non-invasive analytical protocols and carried out X-ray and infrared reflectography (IR) scans to help better understand the structure of the panel and highlight revisions in the under-drawing. The findings of this research were shown alongside the painting and the children's artwork enabled visitors to the exhibition to further develop their understanding of the painting and of Renaissance materials and processes. This further extended the community of practice and demonstrates how collaborations with local communities can enrich and re-imagine research on museum objects and collections. In a post-project interview with the Museum Director he reflects: 'I think it is so valuable and important that curators, and scientist and conservators too, don't just sit in their offices guarded

Figure 4
Landscape by 11 year old, egg tempera on wooden board made after studying the painting and the writings of Cennino Cennini

from the public, but on the contrary, can have their research guided by the kinds of questions that they are asked, . . . we learn from that process'.

This interest in understanding and learning about different ideas and perspectives was echoed in other feedback from academics and students from within the university. This constructivist theoretical framework assumes that not only academics, but community members, young people and teachers and other participants, can be located as researchers. Many visitors to the exhibition found seeing the children's artwork on display invigorating and exciting and so were in turn inspired by the children's artwork. A university professor told the project team 'as an Italian Renaissance person who must have seen that painting hundreds of times, I looked at it through entirely new eyes'. Visiting artists, teachers and students took photos and made notes to take ideas back with them to the classroom and studio further extending the community of practice.

The role of art specialist leads and champions within primary schools

Teachers reported being inspired, refreshed and empowered by the initial training sessions and returned to school full of ideas and determination to make the project succeed within their setting. The 12 teachers who filled in the end-of-project survey held a combination of different roles which included a head teacher, 2 senior management posts, 5 subject leads and 7 class teachers. Many of these had been involved in leading the project across the school and training other teachers within their setting. They all agreed or highly agreed that they had developed their knowledge, skills and confidence as part of the project. It is possible that this

opportunity to take on a degree of leadership within the CPD contributed to the high quality of the outcomes of the project (Cordingley *et al*. 2015, 5). Several of the senior leaders reported how the project had helped to raise the profile of art and design within their schools and helped them to achieve others' goals such as Artsmark, further extending the impact of the project. As participants became project leads and experts within their individual schools, which further extended the community of practice. This process was supported by the provision of high-quality digital resources. The training sessions were documented and shared through the artist blog and teachers were given copies of the slide shows used during the session. They were also given high-resolution images of the focus painting which they were able to print out or use on interactive whiteboards. This enabled teachers to share the artwork with the children in the classroom, removing the necessity of having to visit the museum to take part in the project and widening access to a much wider group of schools and children.

Tensions and challenges

Unfortunately, the success of the project and its popularity with local schools and teachers also led to some negative impacts. Due to restrictions of space, the museum was not able to display the work that every school had created in response to the painting. Although teachers were warned from the outset that this would be the case, the project team were unprepared for how difficult this would be. The notion of a community of practice is essentially democratic and egalitarian with members with differing levels of skills, knowledge and expertise being valued equally as all contributions are acknowledged and respected (Lave & Wenger 1991). The selective nature of the final exhibition had the unfortunate effect of leaving some schools and teachers disappointed. We worked hard to reach out to these schools through the exhibition public programme and invited many back to share their stories and celebrate their work. We also created an online exhibition and project booklet which included projects that were not displayed in the museum. This highlights a challenge for exhibition-focused collaborative projects of this kind within a community of practice where it is important to make space for contributions from everyone. In future projects the decisions about which work to display should perhaps be handed back to the members of the community in line with the more inclusive and egalitarian approach. This would have an additional consequence of serving to disrupt existing and well-established hierarchies of power around display and curation within the art museum.

Constructivist approaches to learning and meaning making

'I really loved doing a project that we had chosen for ourselves and planned from the start. I think that this is the best project I have ever done' (feedback from 9 year old)

The constructivist learning paradigm has underpinned museum and gallery education for many years (Anderson *et al*. 2002; Hooper-Greenhill 2004; Pringle 2009; Burnham and Kai-Kee 2011; Yuan 2018) and has its roots within socio-cultural theories of development where change is understood to be shaped

through interactions with others and through experience of the external world (Vygotsky 1978, 1986; Wertsch 1985). The role of the environment, teacher and peer group is a key part of this process. The collaborative and participant-led approach exemplified by this paradigm can be a liberating and empowering experience for participants, as the quote above from a 9-year-old student demonstrates. The National Gallery's Take One programme has been particularly influential in demonstrating the efficacy of this approach which provides 'an open-ended, progressive, and comforting space to inspire learner's critical and creative engagement with art' (Yuan 2018, 8). Participants are supported and encouraged to follow their own lines of enquiry and then work together to construct a shared understanding of art objects through close looking, careful observation and discussion. Expertise is located within each of the participants, opening up possibilities for multiple interpretations and perspectives.

As well as providing access to expert knowledge, museum educators also modelled constructivist approaches to looking at paintings with young children during the training sessions. Feedback from teachers indicated that they valued the combination of contextual and technical information about the painting with the demonstration of practical skills and techniques to support visual literacy and make art accessible to young children. In their study of a museum-based teacher training programme for primary teachers, Sekules *et al*. (2006) also observed that museum educators encouraged a more open-minded attitude to artworks and emphasised to teachers the importance of their own personal context and experience when looking at art rather than relying on expert input and analysis. They found that training teachers in constructivist approaches to looking at and interpreting art supported teachers to develop their confidence and skills in teaching children to look at art. However, they also acknowledge the need for teachers to 'invest in their own enhancement of knowledge and understanding as the primary means by which they can bring their pupils greater opportunities for experiencing art' (Sekules *et al*. 2006, 579). During their residency project at Tate Liverpool, Riding *et al*. (2019) encountered challenges when encouraging school-based practitioners to develop a constructivist, participatory pedagogy in favour of a more knowledge-based approach. Researchers and educators found a conflict between more open-ended enquiry-based museum pedagogy and classroom practice which places an emphasis on subject specialist knowledge (Riding *et al*. 2019, 931). The teachers they worked with felt that they needed subject-specific knowledge about individual works in order to be able to teach effectively. They note that: 'For teachers, subject knowledge is a key professional competency which they are continuously judged against and therefore their self- belief and confidence to teach requires it' (Riding *et al*. 2019, 937). It is possible that the success of Inspire in part lies in providing opportunities for teachers to both develop their subject knowledge and learn new skills and approaches to art teaching. The training sessions, digital resources and continued support of the project team through blog posts, school visits and the final exhibition provided support over the 12 months of the project and beyond as part of the emerging community of practice. The Take One model also provides a useful focus and framework for the use of individual artworks within the art gallery which might also act as boundary objects to 'divert teachers and gallery educators from well-trodden paths and habitual ways of thinking' (Herne 2006, 16). By focusing on one object, we had a shared focus for understanding and enquiry.

‘I felt just like a real artist’: the importance of making

However, visual literacy is much more than just an aesthetic response or the ability to interpret meaning from an image or object. Making, or the artistic dimension is also key (Boughton 1986). It is, therefore, vital that a focus on art making processes should also be a core component of any teacher training programme in art and design (Prentice 2019). Yuan (2018, 13) describes how the two pedagogical principles of co-interpretation and co-construction are crucial elements of museum-informed art education (MIAE), because they both ‘champion learner-centred education, indicating that both making art and participating in art making demand learners’ creative input and participation as well as their interaction with the wider socio-cultural and physical world’. Many museums and galleries have purpose-built art studios which provide creative space to explore and access different art materials and activities. Art museums often offer opportunities for teachers to work with specialist artists as part of their schools and teacher programmes (Jones & Plumb 2019). The training sessions gave teachers the opportunity to work with artists to explore their interests and ideas and experiment with different materials and making in the art studio at the museum. It was hoped that these experiences would demonstrate the benefit of encouraging children to do the same.

The exceptionally high quality of many of the submissions we received for the exhibition revealed that children and teachers had looked closely at the painting, experimented with different techniques and processes and worked collaboratively. We were able to display artwork in a range of different media including tempera paintings on wood, prints, drawings and a variety of 3D models using wire, modroc and other materials as the examples in Figure 5 demonstrate. It was clear that teachers had made use of the digital learning resources shared through the museum website and artist blogs as some had adapted ideas modelled on the artist’s website. In the post-project teacher survey several participants reflected on how the project had encouraged them to spend longer on an art project, to let the children have a go and one wrote that it had reminded them ‘how important it is for children to be allowed to experiment freely with materials and find their own way of creating’. Many of the participating schools devised opportunities for children to have the time and space to make their own decisions and to follow their own ideas and inspiration as promoted through the training sessions (Briggs 2016). Feedback collected from children within the submissions also revealed that they had been given opportunities to try things out and experiment with a range of artistic techniques, as this reflection from a 9 year old shows: ‘My picture is based on the mountain Cupid was brought to in the story. When I was experimenting with charcoal and graphite for the lake I noticed I could blend them together. When I was doing the lakes perspective I struggled a lot but I was doing it from the bottom looking up . . . ’.

This quote also demonstrates the close link between making and thinking and reminds us of the serious cognitive challenge presented by visual thinking and modes of experience (Dewey 1934; Arnheim 1969; Eisner 1972). It shows how looking at, talking about and making art and visual imagery can support the development of metacognition and higher order thinking (Perkins 1989; Noble 2006, 2016; Noble & Styles 2009; Ritchhart 2011; Tishman 2018). Many of the children involved in the project reflected on feeling ‘just like a real artist’, and how the project had shown them ‘you can use loads of materials to make art, not just paint and pencil’, and how ‘working with the clay was really fun and we felt very proud that we had thought of this idea and followed it through from beginning to end’.

Shifting practice

Children's feedback also evidenced change in teaching practice as part of the project, with one 9 year old reflecting: 'normally, in art, we all have to do the same thing. I really enjoyed having the chance to experiment and choose what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it.' Another student stated how 'I really enjoyed working as a group rather than on my own, which we don't often get to do.' Their comments reveal how empowering it can be for young artists and makers to be given the time and space to follow their own ideas and interests and to experiment with different materials and processes. With the current emphasis on reading and writing in UK primary schools, opportunities to explore visual modes of communication and expression in this way are both rare and vitally important (Arizpe & Styles 2016; Pantaleo 2019). Several teachers reflected on how the project had impacted on children who usually struggled with more 'academic' tasks by placing value on visual and creative responses. Parents and visitors to the exhibition also admired how children were given the opportunity to follow their own ideas and interests. One parent told us how their child was so inspired to draw after her visit to the museum that they had to borrow paper and crayons for her to use when she got home as she did not have any of her own. It really captured her imagination and ignited an interest in drawing. Her finished artwork (shown in Figure 6) was displayed at the start of the exhibition and printed on the invitation for the private view. Six months after the project her parents reported how she was still drawing at every opportunity but now has a suitcase full of art materials after Christmas gifts from all her family to support her creative talents.

Figure 5
Montage of children's artwork

The potential of art-museum-led CPD programmes

The project was made accessible to far more children and schools than would have been able to visit in person by investing time in teacher training and by providing quality digital resources to support teaching in schools. The PowerPoints, high-resolution digital reproductions of the painting and blog posts created in collaboration with AccessArt enabled teachers to extend the community of practice within their own settings to act as project leads and experts. The use of digital resources to support in-person teacher training opportunities in this way offers a useful 'blended' model for future projects, particularly as museums and other training providers look to develop their offer post COVID-19.

Implications for practice

Some of the most important factors of the success of the community of practice were found to be:

1. Specialist input from museum educators and researchers enabling teachers to develop their knowledge of the context, meaning and construction of a Renaissance painting.
2. Providing training in enquiry-based strategies for supporting children to look at art by building on their own experiences and interests.
3. Artist-led workshops and resources supporting the development of a more open-ended, playful and process-led approach to teaching art and design where children were encouraged to follow their own lines of enquiry through making.

The large number of exceptionally high-quality submissions to the final exhibition and feedback from children and teachers revealed that the project did have an impact on teaching practice. Children were empowered to look, think and make together and that this was a highly motivating and enjoyable experience for many of those involved. Feedback from participants indicates that this approach was different from previous experiences being taught art and design.

Figure 6
Drawing of Cupid and Psyche by girl, aged 6

Conclusion

The Inspire project demonstrates how a regional art museum can serve as a hub for teacher training and development and support the development of a community of practice around art and design education. The project brought a large number of schools and teachers together to develop teacher knowledge and skills in art and design and to encourage children to form meaningful connections with museum collections. The project addressed the challenge faced by museum educators to 'develop a pedagogy that genuinely respects everyone's voices: the visitors', her own, curators' and art historians', and the voices of tradition' (Burnham and Kai-Kee 2011, 48) by creating opportunities to share and celebrate different levels of knowledge and expertise within an emerging community of practice. The exhibition provided a powerful motivating force and a real-life context and purpose for the children's creative explorations (Yuan *et al*. 2015). In addition, the project revealed how practitioner-led action research projects of this kind can begin to challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge around art objects and collections, to ensure that art museums become more relevant, creative and participatory spaces.

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